



Natomas Oral Histories

2015/027

Oral interview of

Ronald Costa Sr.
and **Emily Costa**

October 15, 1996

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This is not a verbatim transcript. Parts of the interview have been paraphrased.

Mark: This is Mark Bowen. The date is October 15, 1996, and this is tape one of an interview with Ronald Costa Sr. As an amendment to the first statement, we also have with us Emily Costa, who is Ronald's mother.

Emily: *[Started in mid-sentence]* Later that night, she got really talkative about it. And Eli and Swally was there, and Christophel's father was there, and another man, and I forget his name. And they all sat down with Eli, Mrs. Ferness' uncle, and had this poker game that they would set a tent up in the yard, and they would go out there with their coal-oil lanterns, and they would play. They said they played for two weeks, and he lost all his land in that card game, Eli did. So, Mrs. Ferness' partner took the rest of our land, the other half of the land, because the two brothers bought the land together and they worked it together, and they were partners. One partner lost his, so George Herget Sr. took it.

Mark: Oh okay, so this was the Herget land.

Emily: That was the Herget land that started out. Then they sold it to Mike Zuberi, this one big piece. I think it was a quarter section of that big piece.

Ronald: That's quite a bit of acreage.

Mark: And then east of—

[00:01:50]

Emily: Mrs. Ferness' mother passed away a week after we started farming their land for them. We farmed Mrs. Ferness' acreage. It was 45 acres and we moved into the tenant house, my husband and I. A week after that, her mother was about 95 years old, went and she died. Before she died, she gave Mrs. Ferness the property on this side of the river to Mrs. Ferness, to Louise Miller, and brother George Herget Jr., and to a brother, Will. The other members of the family, they had land over on the Yolo side, and they—

Ronald: Discovery Park area.

Mark: Oh, okay.

Emily: And that's what she was telling me that night.

Ronald: See how this slough goes over here?

Emily: And then Will lost his land.

Ronald: She owned this land over here in that portion of Discovery Park.

Mark: And that's built

Emily: And Mrs. Ferness wanted it, and her brother George wanted it also. She was taking care of the mother at the time, so the mother gave it to her. That started a small family feud. Will, who had been in World War I, he was sprayed — they used a lot of mustard gas in that — and he was always in pain. And he turned out to be an alcoholic because the pain was so great and that knocked the pain out. He used to carry his buggy whip around. I saw him once at Mrs. Ferness'. This happened a couple of weeks after we moved into the tenant house. He had this little buggy whip with him. He used to use it fishing, and he would go over the levee into the bypass and fish off into the river. He had too much alcohol, and he just, I guess, lost his balance. Meg lived across the river in Yolo County. And what else is there to say about that?

[00:05:21]

Mark: And you acquired 45 acres?

Emily: Not I — Mrs. Ferness did. Each about 50 acres. I farmed 45 acres of the acreage she had. It was 55 acres. They all received the same amount except for Aunt Meg. She moved over into Yolo County, and they had property over there. So, hers was a little bit more than that.

Ronald: See, that ground divided up between Mrs. Ferness, who was Herget's sister, George Herget's sister.

Emily: That's right.

Ronald: And George Herget owned this one right here.

Emily: That's all. And they used the barn and the levee in the wintertime, and they would bring the horses up into that big barn. When we first came here to live in Natomas, we used to farm with horses, in 1933.

Mark: Okay.

Emily: My husband, what did he have now that the tractor company wanted? Oh, it was a huge Mack truck with a bed on it and everything. A Bulldog Mack. So, he traded in the small Mack and a tractor — that was a gas tractor. So, we started farming the land for Mrs. Ferness.

Mark: What year did you—

Emily: 1935. His cousin, Frank, gave us two horses as a wedding present, so we had those. That's what we farmed with. We farmed with the horses. We did all our cultivating with the horses, and the planting. The tractor would till the soil for us. What else is there to say?

Mark: I'm kind of interested in the farming as far as what the procedures—

Emily: I guess all the farmers in that area were farming with horses. There were very few tractors. And every time a farmer got a new tractor, all the farmers would come down and have a look at it. And then what else did we get? We got the—

[00:08:17]

Ronald: Well, after that, it was getting the equipment. We got one piece of equipment every year for a lot of years.

Emily: Yeah, and then we got the bean house, too. We got a bean house.

Ronald: You see, this land in here was all bean land. Lots of beans farmed in here. Pink beans, California red beans, black-eyed beans.

Emily: They don't farm anymore like they used to.

Ronald: Well, they don't raise beans in here anymore, but this was really good—

Emily: Now it's sugar beets and safflower and—

Ronald: Tomato.

Emily: Tomatoes, mostly. Lots of beans and lots of peas. In the wintertime, they would plant peas and then thrash them. They would farm — they would double crop. They would put in mostly beans then for the second crop.

Mark: It would be rotating?

Ronald: Rotating.

Emily: They were rotated. They would rotate.

Ronald: They would plant one crop that would put nitrogen in the soil. Then after that, the crop would last about four or five years. Then after that, you would plant tomatoes or sugar beets, which would take the nitrogen out of the soil.

Emily: About every four years, they would put the alfalfa in.

Ronald: They would rotate them.

Emily: To rotate. And then they would put in — they would double the crop, but there was always something different in the land. They didn't put the same crop in year after year. Now I see more of that. The farmers. They get tomatoes in, they seem to keep on. They just specialize in one crop. There's no barley or wheat in the wintertime anymore. Not down in the area we're living in here now. And they don't double crop. Just single crops. That's about it.

[00:10:23]

Mark: I'm kind of curious about the other machinery and the procedures used. There must have been different machinery, obviously, for—

Emily: Oh, no, we had a bean harvester. He bought it — it was secondhand. He bought it from — what was the name of that man?

Ronald: That he bought the bean harvester from?

Emily: Yeah. I forget it. It doesn't really matter. And then he'd get extra money that way. We would thrash our beans and then we would go out and thrash everybody else's beans.

Ronald: It's too bad you can't, at least not on an audiotape. But the bean harvesters that she's talking about were big. Like that. And they were made of wood, basically made out of wood.

Emily: We have one in the barn, don't we?

Ronald: Yeah, there's a bean harvester in the barn. We are going to try to donate that to Winter Ranch for antique farming equipment.

Mark: This photograph here?

Ronald: No, the actual harvester. We have one of these.

Mark: Oh, wow.

Ronald: We have one of these in the barn. Notice that's all made out of wood.

Mark: Right.

Ronald: You can't see it from here, but this — well you can, too. Those are all boards.

Emily: You know I have that tape of the farming. It's at home. I didn't think about that until now.

Ronald: We can probably copy that.

Mark: This picture 17 that has, it looks like, about six or eight different harvesters on there. Was that the way it was?

Emily: Yeah, they go like this. One would be here and one would be right side of it. They'd put about six or eight, depending upon how big the field is.

Ronald: Now, that's grain. See all the horses that they used? And then there's harvester, harvester, harvester, harvester, harvester, harvester, harvester.

Emily: And then when you start getting tractors, it cut the paraphernalia and anything used to hook up the horses off, and put a little dog bar on it, and pulled it with the tractor instead of the horses.

Mark: Oh, okay.

Ronald: You see, this kind of stuff is just before my time, but I still remember these things being around, these old tractors and old harvesters. But these things, we ran ours clear into the '50s.

[00:12:45]

Mark: So is this a steam tractor here, or this is—

Ronald: No. See the big radiator on it?

Mark: Okay.

Ronald: See the cylinders here? It's a big gas rig. These over here are steam run.

Mark: These here are? Oh, okay.

Ronald: See, you can tell by all that smoke.

Mark: Right. Now what are these gentlemen in picture 17 doing? They're standing—

Ronald: Well, they're not farming because they are in suits.

Mark: Right. I kind of got that picture.

Ronald: These guys came out to get a photo with this thing in their suits. See — they are all dressed in suits.

Mark: Are you anywhere in these pictures here?

Ronald: No, no. no. These pictures are probably right around the time of the levee construction or just after. So, they're probably in the teens and '20s.

Emily: Yes, before the levees came in, they couldn't double crop.

Ronald: This is probably in the '20s, early '30s.

Mark: And these are District 1000, it looks like.

Ronald: Yeah.

Mark: Now are these, in picture 16 here, these horse-drawn — are these just wagons here or these actual next to the harvester?

Ronald: The actual harvester has a tractor on it. See the tractor?

Mark: Right.

Ronald: But then the horses are carrying the grain out.

Mark: Okay, so they're just—

Ronald: They were a horse and wagon.

Mark: Right. What are these to the left of the harvester?

Ronald: Oh, that's called a header. And that thing has a sickle bar on it like a mower, like the old McCormick reaper. It puts the grain inside the machine. It cuts it and puts in the machine. There's a good picture of one right here from the front. It cuts the hay, or the grain, lays it in there, and then it goes up this chute inside and then it harvests it.

Mark: Oh, okay. So those are kind of like the classic harvesters you see?

[00:14:56]

Ronald: Yep. All grain. Now the one that we have still is a bean harvester, not a grain harvester. So, it's slightly different. My earliest memories are actually from living down in the Ferness ranch, which was part of that Herget estate. So that's back in about the '40s. Anyway, my earliest memories are from growing up in that Ferness ranch, which is the place that's right across from Chevy's restaurant now. Under where those oak trees are. That's where we used to live. There was — my dad had the 55 acres there. In, what, 1941, he bought the place where the airport is. He bought another 40-acre ranch up there.

Emily: Yeah. We bought it exactly two weeks before Pearl Harbor.

Ronald: So there it is. Two weeks before Pearl Harbor. We bought the ranch up where the airport is. Farmed that one clear 'til the airport took it over. They condemned it. Then bought the place where the house is, where the home place is now, which is on El Centro Road just down from the equipment place. It's the farmhouse that has the Quonset barn on it. That's where the harvester is kept — the big wooden bean harvester.

Mark: How did the airport — I mean, how did they approach you as far as condemning the land for the airport?

[00:17:08]

Ronald: Oh, well, they tried the negotiations process. The way that worked is, I think Dad wanted \$2,000 an acre and they had offered something like \$1,400 or \$1,500. So then eventually he came down to about \$1,800 an acre, and they came up to about \$1,600 and could never get together there for a hundred bucks. So the thing went to condemnation and went to court. They had a trial that lasted about — it's \$100, seems like a small amount of money to go to court for. But at issue was several thousand acres to build the airport on. So whatever price was set there would be carried throughout the process. So with the County of Sacramento, it was a big deal. And of course, with the landowners, it was a big deal, too, when you take the aggregate total of all the dollars involved. So the thing went to court, and the trial lasted for, what, about six weeks. It was a condemnation suit that lasted about six weeks. The jury awarded \$3,400 per acre out of the trial. The County of Sacramento appealed it. So in order to come to a compromise after the appeal, why, we came down somewhat, didn't we?

Emily: Mm-hmm.

Ronald: And then settled for, you know, some other price around \$3,000 or something, or \$3,200. So that's a case where over—

Emily: Actually, they paid to argue over that \$100. Because—

Ronald: But from the county's perspective or the public's perspective, it would have been — the county would have been better just to pay the \$1,800 or \$2,000. Because it turned out to be worth a million dollars.

Mark: Hindsight is 20/20.

Ronald: Yeah, that's it.

Emily: Well, you know *[unintelligible]* that handled that case for it? He was Portuguese, too. But he always figured he was the smart one. The rest of the Portuguese were all dumb because they were farmers and he was a lawyer.

Ronald: We're Portuguese, so— *[Laughter]*

Emily: We're Azoreans, really. We're not Portuguese. Because the two islands, the island your grandmother and grandfather came from, were settled by the Flemish.

Ronald: Oh, I see.

[00:20:00]

Emily: Yeah. It was during the famines in Europe that the Portuguese princess went to Fleming and married the Flemish prince. Then as a wedding present, the prince gave her the Holland or Dutch — well, I guess it's a blend of everything there — gave her the island of Pico and the island of Faial to her as a wedding gift. So she took the peasantry. They were starving to death. Put them on a boat, gave them food, gave them seed, gave them tools, and sent them over to the islands. Up until then, they were uninhabited. So they thrived. Finally, other countries, they would stop off, sailors. In those days, if they couldn't get a crew of men onto a ship, one of those sailing ships, they would Shanghai them. But they always put into the Azores to get water and get more food, and they would jump ship. So they would turn around and hide up in the hills. They would send in some of the permanent crew, and they would Shang some more help and take them on over to America.

Mark: Hard going over, huh?

Emily: His name was Dr. Late *[unsure of spelling]*. I went to night school with my sister Marie so we could learn a little bit more about Portugal and the Azores. He was supposed to teach the language, but he taught everything else but the language. So that was his little thing that he told us about how the Azores started to get settled. So we're probably a mixture of just about everything, like a lot of people here in the United States are. They don't pay attention to the — you can be French or Dutch or what-have-you, and if you live on those islands. You're Portuguese. We don't care about what your ancestors were.

Ronald: Well, that's the way it works over here with Americans.

Mark: Funny how that works. What year did your parents—

Emily: My parents came — gee, I don't know when they came from the Azores. My mother came before, and my father came before they were married. I know that much. They met at a Portuguese

picnic in — it's a little small town, Emeryville. It's between Berkeley and Oakland, and it faces into the bay.

Ronald: When was that?

Emily: It was 18-something, dear. I just don't know because my mother came over with an uncle. She didn't tell me this. Aunt Emily did — my godmother. She told me after she had died that when she came over, it was to marry somebody. But that somebody was an old man and he had five grown children, and here she was about nineteen when she came. So she ran away and she wouldn't have any part of it. Her uncle lived in Sacramento here. She came up and stayed with him for a while. Then she went to San Francisco and worked, oh maybe, as a housekeeper in San Francisco. Anyway, she met him at a Portuguese picnic. He just got tired. My father just got tired of living in Portugal, in the Azores. He hopped one of the freighters and they put him to work. He worked himself over to California. When he got to the United States, he just worked his way over doing anything he could.

Mark: Because he landed on the East Coast?

[00:25:14]

Emily: Yeah. He went down the San Joaquin Valley where he had friends. He worked on the ranches down there. The SP took over a little barge that used to go across the San Joaquin valley. One of those pull barges, you know? He got a job on that before it was SP. And then when the SP got it, they closed it down and they transferred the men to the bay — to San Francisco Bay. He worked from Oakland to San Francisco. First it was Sausalito to San Francisco. Then it was Oakland to San Francisco.

Mark: That was on the ferry boats?

Emily: That's on the ferry boats, yeah. So I don't have anything else, I guess. You're not even interested in that. You're interested in something else. *[Laughter]*

Ronald: On later times that are not quite so far back, I started school at Jefferson School in about 19— oh what would it be? Well, I was born in '37, so it would be '43.

Emily: You were six years old.

Ronald: In 1943, I started school in Jefferson School.

Emily: Because we didn't have kindergarten. I would have put you in kindergarten, because you learn a lot there in kindergarten. When the kids go to school and they are there all day and they get scared and miss their mothers, you know. Because they are around them all the time up until that age. They're afraid their mother won't come back for them. One of my boys started running home.

Ronald: Jefferson School was located at the intersection of San Juan Road and Whitter Way. Where it is right now. I think, didn't Saylor donate that land?

Emily: He donated that land, yeah.

Ronald: A farmer named Saylor who used to own the Whitter Ranch donated that land for the school. They built a two-room schoolhouse there. Well, it was a one-room at first, and then it was two rooms.

Emily: Saylor bought that from the Natomas Company. He couldn't make his payments when the Depression came. I guess he was arrears in the payments and Whitter went through the Natomas Company to get it from him, though.

Ronald: Here it is: O. M. Saylor. His name is still on the land.

Emily: They usually put — I didn't think they did that. I thought you had to pay for it before they put the name on the title.

Mark: Do you know what O. M. stood for in Saylor?

Ronald: No. I have a picture of him over here mowing hay, though, with the horses. I was going to get that out. It might have his name on it. Oh, by golly, there's the George Herget house right there from the Herget estate.

Mark: Picture 9.

Ronald: There's a good view of the header. Well, it says O. M. Saylor here. So I guess his name is going to be O. M. from now on. *[Laughter]* It might be Oscar, who knows.

Mark: Okay. These are actual — these are the cullers, the harvesters?

Ronald: That's a horse-drawn mower. There used to be a lot of those around here.

Emily: I have one of them in the yard, a couple of them in the yard yet.

Ronald: Father used to own a couple. You've still got them, I guess.

Mark: They've got three teams working. Was that a common—

Ronald: Yeah, that was—

Mark: Was that about the average size of the—

Emily: Mm-hmm.

Ronald: That's the way you did it.

Emily: He owned a lot of land over there. Saylor did.

[00:29:55]

Ronald: The levee was built in 1917, so that subdivision was around that time. By subdivision, I mean District 1000 in the Sutter County portion of it. That was all done in one fell swoop. The way that worked is the Natomas Company built the levees, reclaimed the land — in other words, they kept the water out. That was reclaiming the land. Built the canal and pumping system. The federal government gave them the land to sell for reclaiming it. That's how that was done. It was part of a federal reclamation project.

Mark: Right.

Ronald: In those days, they weren't too worried about the salamanders out there. They just wanted to get people living. *[Laughter]* So the EIR was, can you do it? Yeah, sure, go ahead. *[Laughter]*

Mark: Was that how this property, this property here, was purchased from—

Ronald: This property is in that same subdivision, so it was all subdivided at that time. It's laid out right here. If you look at the deed, it will reference some map that was filed in 1917 — the subdivision map. That was essentially this. Now, the guy that used to survey for the Natomas Company was Truxel — so, the name of the Truxel Road. I've been reading in the paper where some people wanted to change that, but he was really one of our founders. So they named the road after him. It used to be the Lower San Juan Road, but they named it the Truxel Road, oh, I don't know, 30 years ago or something. Now I notice that some of those community groups want to change that name. It maybe doesn't sound so good. They don't know about the history on it.

Mark: That would be kind of a shame.

Ronald: Yeah. Well, times change and you lose connection with the old people. So that's just the way it goes. After going to Jefferson School, in my last year I went to American Basin School because the American Basin School District and the Jefferson School District unified. They held an election and formed the Natomas School District. That's when the Natomas School District was formed. That's when I was in the eighth grade.

Emily: I don't think they have any more schools in the Natomas, do they? They have to go down—

Ronald: Yes, they do. There's a big one right by *[unintelligible]* there. The old Natomas School is still on Del Paso.

Emily: Oh, is it?

Ronald: Yeah. And there's a couple more of them now in the subdivisions. There's a new Jefferson School and, oh, I forget their names. I was on that school board. Shame on me, right? *[Laughter]*

[00:33:08]

Mark: What grades was Jefferson School?

Ronald: They were first through eighth. Later they became K through eighth. But when I first started there, it was one through eight. I started out in the first grade. A lot of the kids, they'd go to the sixth grade or something and then go farming. Or go to the eighth grade and then farm and then wouldn't go to high school. They just went into the farming business at an early age.

Mark: Did you have a lot of friends that did that?

Ronald: Just a few. Manuel Barandas was a guy that did that. He went to the eighth grade and never went to high school, and started farming. He was a very successful farmer. He farmed a lot of land. Probably a couple of thousand acres. He did all right for a county boy. *[Laughter]* I guess the South Natomas, when it started developing, I remember that pretty dog-gone well because that was going to be like a real big change going from farmland to houses. Through that process, Frank Freitas was one of the big instigators on it. He had owned 550 acres over pretty much in the vicinity of north of the Herget

estate. He had just about everything north of the Herget estate up to approximately where the freeway goes now — Interstate 80. Five hundred and fifty acres in there, which included the old Azevedo place that has that farmhouse that was restored and put into the subdivision over there. It still stands today. Real good old house. Had a big full basement and inlaid hardwood floors and a lot of brick work on it. It was a nice house. Even though it was old, it was a nice house.

Mark: It still is today. It's a nice house.

Ronald: Freitas wanted to develop then. So he teamed up with some Los Angeles developers. Over a period of probably three to five years, through lots of public hearings, and EIRs, and a lot of arguments, and a lot of city council hearings, they finally made a South Natomas plan and ended up finally subdividing it. That was kind of a first subdivision in the South Natomas area.

Mark: When was that?

Ronald: That's after Northgate. I'm not considering — Northgate happened way before that.

Emily: Gardenland was the first subdivision. But then they put a stop to it for a while.

Ronald: Right. Gardenland — I remember Gardenland forever. Northgate built up after that. I remember that building up when I was a kid. Then there was no development for a number of years until South Natomas finally opened up. That was in — it's hard for me to pin down a year on that. But that thing was in the '60s sometime — maybe '70. Around '70. The EIR documents will speak for themselves as to the dates.

[00:37:04]

Mark: Frank Freitas. What did people think about when he decided he wanted to develop the land. I mean, what were people's feelings about it?

Ronald: Well, the developers loved him and the naturalists hated him. It was just that same thing that's repeating itself now whenever a development goes in. There's the pros and cons. Some people want it. Usually the people that want it are the ones that stand to gain the most. The people that don't want it are usually the people that are more environmentally oriented or they simply want to keep their place in the country and don't want anybody building around them. I can understand that. This place here now is the last *[unintelligible]* South Natomas to be developed. We're going to go in for subdivision now. Right now we're in the Willow Creek assessment district, which is starting to build the drainage facility and putting in some new pumps down by El Centro Road and then Garden Highway, and then after that it's open this up for development. But as far as the early developments go, all I know about is right around my own little sphere of knowledge, which doesn't include a lot.

Mark: Well, Natomas is a fairly small area.

Ronald: Yeah, it's kind of small compared to some other areas. You take the whole Natomas, you know, it goes clear up to Sutter County. At one time it was pretty easy to name off everybody that lived out here.

Emily: You can't do it anymore.

Ronald: You can't do it anymore, right. When I went to Jefferson School, there was — well, when I was in sixth grade, there was three of us. And the whole school had about 45 kids, first through eight. That gives you an idea how many people there was around.

Mark: Wow.

Ronald: That was pretty much it. American Basin was way up near Sutter County, and that was a school of a similar size.

Mark: How many teachers were at Jefferson School?

Ronald: Two. There was always two teachers when I was there. Mrs. Mack and Mrs. Thomas and Mrs. Davidson was there.

Emily: And each taught four grades.

Ronald: Yeah, they each taught four grades. One teacher would teach one through four and the other one would teach five through eight. Mrs. Thomas could speak Portuguese. There was a lot of Portuguese in the community that couldn't speak English. So she used to teach the younger kids in order to teach them English. We had bilingual teachers clear back in the '40s. I have photos of all those teachers here. Maybe I'll copy those and mark them and turn them over to the project.

[00:40:13]

Mark: I'm kind of curious about this picture, number 3, here. It that Grace?

Ronald: It says Garden Highway bordering Natomas lands looking west. Sacramento River to the left, *[unintelligible]* to the right. So if we're looking west, this could have been the River View Orchard and this Swallow's Nest Orchard. The River View Orchard was owned by Christophel. Swallow's Nest Orchard was by Levitt Swelling *[unsure of spelling]*. What was the old man Swelling's name? It was Levitt, too, wasn't it? So that was the Swallow's Nest Ranch, of course, is where Swallow's Nest is now — the golf course. Christophel's River View Orchard was over there next to it. That was what would now be Garden Highway and Orchard Lane. That's why they call it Orchard Lane: There's an orchard on either side of it.

Emily: Well, Souza had an orchard in there, too.

Ronald: Yeah.

Mark: Who owns Swallow's Nest golf, the land that Swallow's Nest sits on?

Ronald: That's owned by all the homeowners.

Mark: Right.

Ronald: I believe that this is probably that orchard when it was a young orchard.

Mark: Okay. So this is before. Who owned it back then?

Ronald: Swelling. And Christophel. Christophel's father was a county treasurer, wasn't he?

Emily: Mm-hmm.

Ronald: So that's just an old pear orchard when it — well, it's a young pear orchard. When I knew this orchard, it was full, mature orchard. In fact, we used to have pears down on the other side of the levee. Down in here. That was all planted. No more. You see there was an orchard in between the levee and—

Mark: Emily, I'm kind of curious. You mentioned your father worked for SP in the Bay Area. What brought him up to this area here?

Emily: He didn't.

Mark: He didn't?

Emily: No, I always lived in — I was born and raised in Berkeley. And my cousin Frank Freitas — my mother, and I, and my two younger sisters came up to visit him. I was his cousin. My husband was his wife's cousin. When it came time for lunch, well, we all sat with hired help and everybody sat at the table together. My husband was fixing his truck over at Frank's place. When he came in, they introduced us. That started our friendship. Then we got married. Then I came up there to live. That was 1934. So that's how that is.

[00:43:53]

Ronald: See, when they were farming with horses, that took a lot of labor. So the farms used to have bunkhouses. The farmhands would live in the bunkhouses right on the farm. Then they had a cookhouse where they would cook meals for the family group. So you might have — one farm might have 20 hands living in a bunkhouse. That's how Freitas ranch was. He had two bunkhouses full of farm labor and then a cookhouse underneath his house. In the basement. The first floor was the cookhouse. The top was the house.

Emily: His house was built, too, before the levees were built. At that time he only owned about — I don't think Frank owned any land. He just rented at that time.

Ronald: That was Meister [*unintelligible*] Ranch.

Emily: That was the Meister, and then Lenny owned a ranch. He farmed both those ranches. When he built the house, they built two stories. Each story was identical. So in the summertime, they would use the bottom part. Downstairs was cold, nice and cool. He would cook down there. Frank and Rose lived upstairs.

Ronald: Here's Meister. It's still on the map.

Mark: Meister?

Ronald: Yeah, that was George Meister. So this old map has lots of old names on it. Like the original founders.

Mark: Yeah, that's a good map.

Ronald: I'll run you a copy, if you want. There's bound to be lots of copies.

[00:47:05]

Ronald: All right, I'm not sure where else to head here.

Mark: Do you want to talk a little bit about the 1955 flood?

Ronald: Oh, yeah. I forgot about that and I have it jotted down right there. In December of 1955, it started raining the first part of December. It rained and it rained and it rained for days and days and days straight. The river kept rising and rising and rising. That's when Shasta Dam was in full force and effect then. But it rained so much that the levees couldn't hold it. Up by Marysville, the levees broke. That ground from Marysville clear up to where the cross canal is all flooded. It was under about, I'd say, 10 feet of water. You could just see like the roof of a house slicking up. When that happened and then the winds came up. The winds started making white caps out there and a lot of waves. The waves started washing out the levee. Sandbagging crews worked hours and hours and hours around the clock to try to sandbag those levees up and successfully defend against further flooding.

Emily: Weren't you and Richard up in that sandbagging deal?

Ronald: Oh, yeah, sure, I worked on the sandbags.

Mark: How did you first hear about it? I mean, what happened here?

[00:48:38]

Ronald: Well, nothing happened here. This area stayed dry. By dry, I mean we didn't flood, but it was wet because it rained so much. There was local flooding, but nothing like there was up there. You could still live in your house and drive down the streets or roads. But up there, it was under water. The only way you could get around was a boat. Of course, when that area floods, there's a lot of animals that live in the ground. They all drown out. Including snakes. There's some huge snakes that live out there. There was like six- and eight-foot-long king snakes and gopher snakes that washed out of their ground or whatever. But a snake can swim a little bit. They don't necessarily drown. So working on that levee project, it was full of snakes. They were all over the place. But they are harmless snakes, but some people just have a natural fear for snakes. So if they are working around them, they get panicky around them. So one of the things about working on that levee and sandbagging was that you were constantly throwing snakes out of the way. *[Laughter]* Things like rats, squirrels, gophers, we didn't see any of those. I think those things pretty much drowned. You know, the ecologists talk about preserving the snakes in the area and preserving everything, but just in the natural course of nature, rains and floods and everything else from time to time do a complete overhaul of the ecosystem. So if something happens to die off, it's not all that bad because it happens in the natural course of things. When they're doing EIRs and things to preserve things, I'm always thinking in the back of my head, they can preserve all they want, but in the natural course of things, trees are going to die out and new ones are going to grow. Through natural selection, things are going to change on their own whether or not environmentalists like it or not. *[Laughter]* I guess it's okay to be an environmentalist and preserve things and not to trash things, but you also have to recognize that things change.

Mark: Nature will correct itself.

[00:51:17]

Ronald: Anyway, in those 1955 floods, it probably took about four or five months to drain all that water out there and to repair the levees. Of course, that had to wait until the summer. There was work going on, on those levees all summer long to get them reinforced again for the next winter. I was just out of high school. I was available, so I worked on that project for, I don't know, three months or something. Patrolling levees, sandbagging, and stuff. That was an event of a lifetime. So, I don't know. There's not much else to say about that other than it happened. If the levees aren't fixed — like right now, they are going around, they formed SAFCA, the Sacramento Area Flood Control Agency, to take a good look at the levee system, the dam system, etcetera, to try to prevent that from happening again in the future. At some point in time, it probably will happen whether we like it or not, but there's no reason in fighting it. At least maybe we can go two- or three-hundred year before it happens by reinforcing the levees and maybe doing something with the dam systems. Because you can't fight nature. It's going to get you. Right?

Mark: It always does.

Ronald: Yeah. So, anyway, I guess it's an editorial opinion. Nothing to do with history.

Mark: Do you ever get worried about the — I mean, about as far as the waters right here and the levees right here?

Ronald: No, I just have too many years in here to worry about that. You know, I was born here.

Emily: I don't worry about it anymore.

Mark: It just doesn't really cross your mind?

[00:53:18]

Ronald: It crosses our mind that thing could go. But when a levee breaks like it did in 1955, it will take the water three or four days to get down here. It doesn't just flood and go whoosh and everything is wet. It takes a lot of time to flood those thousands of acres that it floods. It takes a matter of days. So you have plenty of time to get out. Somebody right in front of the break might have a problem. Right in this specific spot relative to the levees about ten miles north of here, these levees are good and strong and the water doesn't get near as high on them. That's probably because the Yolo Bypass is over there and it takes off some water. So is the Sutter Bypass up there. It takes off some water. So by the time it gets down here, there's more outlets. So if a levee breaks normally, it's going to break up there if it's a Sacramento River flood. If it's an American River flood, the vulnerable spot is River Park because that's where the river narrows. In the scheme of things, eventually it'll flood. If SAFCA does its job, it'll be a long time. That's about it.

Mark: Is there anything else you wanted to discuss or talk about?

Emily: I can't think of anything else.

Ronald: I'll let you take a look at the pictures. Whatever ones you want to reproduce, I'll take down and get them reproduced. If you want a copy of the map, I'll copy it.